

# **A ‘Thick Description’ Genre Analysis of Death Announcement Notices**

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## **Introduction**

Death is an unpleasant but inevitable reality of human life. People die on daily basis and leave survivors in a period of grief and mourning. Unlike grief, which is private and individual, mourning is collective and communal, thus cultural. This means that like many other social practices, it varies both in terms of form and content from one community to another (Boor & Bloor, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to examine the schematic shaping of the discourse of the Death Announcement Notice, henceforth DAN, which is normally used in the mourning ceremonies in Tabriz, the context of research. The analysis involved detecting underlying macro structures, or moves (Swales, 1990; Nwugu, 1990, and Bhatia, 1993), and the surface level textual features by means of which these macro patterns are realized. It was supplemented with explanations instigated from the socio-cultural context of the research.

## **Contextual Background information**

The context of research was Tabriz, a major historical city and the capital of E. Azarbaijan Province in the northwest of Iran. An overwhelming majority of its two million population are ethnically Azarbaijani Turks. They speak Azeri Turkish a south-western variant of Oghuz Turkish as their mother tongue, but they also speak Farsi as the official language of Iran used in educational and administrative contexts, specifically in its written mode. The religion of the people is Shiite Islam, thus all social ceremonies such as mourning for the dead are conducted in accordance with Islamic tradition. According to this tradition, when somebody passes away, the corpse should be buried the next day. The funeral starts in the morning with the washing and shrouding the corpse, performing special collective prayers led by a clergy for the dead, and carrying the corpse to his/her resting place while chanting verses from the holy book, Quran. Right after the burial, a forty day period of mourning is observed by the survivors and the near relatives of the deceased. During this period four ceremonial mournings are held: the ‘shame

ghariban' (Farsi, roughly meaning '*the first evening in the grave*') ceremony which is always held in the first evening after the burial; the 'uch' (Turkish, meaning '*the third day*'), or Tarhim (Arabic, which means God's blessing) ceremony, and 'girkh' (Turkish, meaning '*the fortieth day*'), or *Chehelom* (Farsi, meaning the 'the fortieth day') ceremony and *Il* (Turkish, meaning the first anniversary), or *Salgard* (farsi, meaning the first anniversary) ceremony.

All these ceremonies are mostly held in mosques designated and hired by the family of the deceased. They take place either in the afternoon (3-5, or 3.30-5.30, or 4-6 pm), or evening (5-7, 5.30-7.30, 6-8 pm) sessions unless it is Friday in which case the ceremony takes place usually late in the morning before noon. All the ceremonies are publically announced by putting up notices appropriate for each ceremony and informally by words of mouth, telephone calls, and more recently via various information technologies such as SMS messages, or online social networks. Among these, DANS are still the most socially and formally accepted means of information passing.

The texts of these notices are usually printed on A or sometimes A3 size white or black sheets of paper. The language of DANS are normally in Farsi, the official language of Iran, but Azeri Turkish versions have started to appear recently.

The information which these death notices have to announce is usually provided by the family of the deceased or their representatives. The number of copies to be printed is usually between minimum 150 to maximum 1000 depending on the social rank and position of the deceased and his/her family, the size of the relatives, friends and acquaintances. But, the most determining factor in the number of print outs is the occasion, that is *Sham Ghariban*, *Uch*, *girkh*, or *il*, in which case the *Uch* (the 3<sup>rd</sup> day memorial ceremony) and *Girkh* (the 40<sup>th</sup> day memorial ceremony) require more print outs. This is due to time factor in the first ceremony, *Sham Ghariban*, taking place only one day after the funeral, leaving everything for spontaneous and somehow chaotic decision makings. This means that few people, except direct relatives, close friends and neighbors usually learn by word of mouth about such ceremony. In *Il* or *Salgard* (first anniversary) ceremony, too few are expected to participate in a ceremony which is generally believed to be a family and relatives' gathering. After the print out, DANs are put up on building walls, electricity poles, shop windows, the workplace bulletin boards, as well as the gate doors of the houses of the deceased and close relatives.

Given this contextual background information, the current study's main concern was to analyze the discourse of DAN for its underlying schematic structure and substructures by means of surface level textual features and the functions they play, and provide insider explanations for each of these structures to reveal how the

interplay of socio-cultural forces and linguistic resources shape the format of the genre of Death Announcement Notice. To do this, a theoretic model for description had to be sought and employed.

### **A model for description**

One of the main concerns indescriptive studies of language is the question of duality, i.e. the relationship between form (signifier) and meaning (signified), or in discourse terms between the text and its context. This duality has generally been recognized in the studies of language, but particularly in studying it as discourse. Decades ago, for instance Halliday (1973, p.65) discerned two levels for the study of language: A micro-sociolinguistic level in which meanings within a piece of text are seen and interpreted in terms of the specific and immediate context which bring about that text, and a macro-sociological level in which a text can be looked at as a means to "transmit the social structure, the values, the systems of knowledge, and all the deepest and most pervasive patterns of culture" (ibid). Two terms emerged in association with these two levels of description, namely the concepts of register and genre.

Register, a term first used by Reid (1956) to refer to variation in the linguistic behaviour of individuals, was defined by Halliday as variation in language use according to variation in situation (Halliday et al, 1964, p.67). This meant that the choices of words and structures are determined by the underlying situational forces, which give the resulting texts their distinct identities as what Halliday called register (ibid.). Despite being a useful descriptive notion, particularly in regards to text typographic studies, the concept of register falls short of a deeper analysis, which could "take us beyond itemization of notions and functions into larger schematic units upon which procedural work can effectively operate" (Widdowson 1983, p. 102). In other words, what the concept of register and the empirical work associated with it failed to achieve was providing an explanatory component for dealing with the underlying contextual processes overarching the textual choices. A similar view has been expressed by Swales (1990, & 2011), and Bhatia (1993) who have called for a 'thicker description' in text analysis, one that is able to "combine socio-cultural (including ethnographic) and psycholinguistic (including cognitive) aspects of text-construction and interpretation with linguistic insights, in order to answer the question, why are specific discourses-genres written and used by the specialist communities the way they are?" (Bhatia 1993, p.47).

Central to thicker approaches to text description is the notion of genre. A genre has been defined as a communicative event with a distinctive underlying goal which shapes its schematic structure (Swales, 1990, p.58). From the perspective of the

North-American Rhetorical Studies, a genre is a discourse with a conventionalized social motif communicated in recurrent situations (Miller 1984, and Bazerman 1994). People working within Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Hasan 1985, and Martin 1992) see a genre as a situational language use with preferred stages and sequences shaped by recurrence in its cultural context. A typical thick description, then, will first focus on placing the genre in question in its context of use, identify its underlying communicative goal, and then turn to the analysis of its schematic structure by examining the pragma-lingual features of its text. The movement is not always from macro to micro structures, but rather takes a cyclic format, that is from context to text and vice versa (Flowerdew 2002).

Central to genre analysis is the concept of 'schematic move' or simply 'move' (Swales 1990, and Bhatia 1993). A move is a bundle of semantic, syntactic and pragmatic elements with a certain communicative goal at micro level which serves the overall underlying goal of a genre (Nwogu 1991, p.114). For Duszak (1994, p.299), a move is a conventional communicative strategy for accomplishing a discourse goal. From a slightly different perspective, Bhatia (1993, pp.30-31) views a move as a cognitive structure which serve certain communicative intentions and is subservient to the overall communicative goals of a given genre. The move boundaries are usually overtly or covertly signaled by linguistic devices.

Based on this framework, the current study has aimed at analyzing the schematic move structure of DANs as used in the socio-cultural context of Tabriz. Before reporting on that, however, it is essential to review a number of empirical reports on similar genres in different cultural contexts. To begin with, Eid (2000) studied Egyptian obituaries to see how gender identity was constructed by culture constraints through the discourse of obituary. The study was concerned with the schematic moves in the obituary whereby the issue of gender identity was most prevalent. Matiki (2001) studied Malawian obituary notices published in newspapers to show that the Malawian notices incorporate features from African oral culture, and the same time Christian and Western traditions to reflect a rapidly developing society. Bonsu's (2002) work was a semiotic reading of obituaries to explore how and where in obituaries the aspirational identities of the deceased was used in an advertising manner to promote the identity of the deceased. Al-Ali's (2005) work examined obituary texts from two Jordanian newspapers for their generic structures and reports of finding nine recurrent patterns in the data. Ergin (2006) studied death announcements published in Turkish newspapers between 1970 and 2006. Askildson (2007) based on Johnstone's (2002) model report five moves in the genre of army obituaries in US context. And finally, Afful (2012), adopting Swales' (1990) CARS model, identified five obligatory and two optional moves in death announcements texts published in Ghanaian newspapers.

All these studies provide a very insightful outlook to new research in the domain of death related discourses. They share a number of similar features such as the genre (i.e. newspaper obituaries), model of analysis (i.e. Swales' CARS model), and findings (i.e. culture specific generic moves). Ergin (2006), particularly, stands out for its emphasis on the role of the researcher's insider experiential and cultural knowledge in providing explanatory interpretation of findings. However, most of these studies have concentrated on obituaries printed in newspapers, and no study was available on the genre of DANs put up in public places, hence the need for the current study.

Before moving on, a point should be made here in connection to Ergin's work. This point is in regards to a tension addressed by Jenner & Titscher (2000), who discern between two epistemological, namely 'etic', and 'emic' camps, the former warning about the danger of local researcher involvement as an intervening factor in research, while the latter welcomes the intervention of local perspective as a crucial factor in providing an additional source of interpretation. It seems, as argued by people like Agar (1996), and Kottak (2006), that this tension can be overlooked if we take a middle ground. That is to say, as long as research of ethnographic nature is at its descriptive phase, it is necessary to stick to an objective model of analysis to yield a generalizable outcome. When it comes to the interpretation phase, however, what is more helpful and reliable is an insider knowledge, particularly when this insider knowledge comes from the researcher on the field. This combinatory stance has been adopted by the current study.

## Method

Given this epistemological stance, a mini-corpus of 50 (25 male and 25 female) death announcement notices was compiled by taking photos of DANs put up in different public places in the city of Tabriz. These notices were for the third day, the fortieth day, or first anniversary ceremonies. Another criterion in the sampling procedure was that only the DANs issued by the first rank survivors of the deceased were included in the corpus.

As for the procedure used in the analysis, each DAN was studied for its schematic moves and the function these move fulfill in the genre of DAN. To identify these moves, the linguistically signaling devices (lexis, syntax, etc.) were detected and tagged with colors pertaining each function or sub function they serve. Tallies and percentages were made for each move and the whole DAN, which were then added up to yield the final results as follow.

## Results

As the first step in this section a preliminary overview of the componential structure of the death notices in the corpus has been presented in the following table, followed by a brief description of each move.

As shown, eight distinctive moves were discerned in the corpus, which all appear in a fixed order. The frequency of occurrence of each move in both the male and female data was between 96 to 100 percent except in move 7, where the percentage for the female data dropped to 80 percent, the only significant quantitative difference between the two groups of data, which will be expounded later in this report. The name given to each move reflects the underlying function of each move. In the following sections each move has been described in much detail.

**Table 1. Move structure and frequency of death announcement notices**

	Function/s	Order	Tally and Frequency of moves in the corpus					
			Male data		Female data		Total	%
Move 1	Death as Truth	1	25	%100	24	%96	49	%99
Move 2	Name of the event	2	25	%100	25	%100	50	%100
Move 3	Elegy in verse	3	24	%96	25	%100	49	%99
Move 4	Announcement of a death	4	25	%100	25	%100	50	%100
Move 5	Public invitation (1)	5	25	%100	25	%100	50	%100
Move 6	Listing the Bereaved families and affiliated sympathizers	6	25	%100	25	%100	50	%100
Move 7	Acknowledging Religious Authority	7	24	%96	20	%80	44	%88
Move 8	Public Invitation (2)	8	25	%100	25	%100	50	%100

### Move 1: Death as Truth

This initial move present in 49 out of 50 death announcement notices and textually realized by short phrases from the holy Quran either in its original language Arabic, or translated version in Farsi, as shown in the following table:

**Table 2. The textual realization of Move 1 (Death as Truth)**

Text	Language	Meaning	Source	N/50
هو الباقي	Arabic	Only He (Allah) will last (for ever)	Quran	32
هو الحي	Arabic	Only He (Allah) will live (for ever)	Quran	1
بازگشت همه بسوی اوست	Farsi	We will all return to Him	Quran	17

The first two of these are verses from the holy Quran, both meaning ‘*only He (Allah) will last forever*’. However, the first phrase was by far more frequent ( $N=32$ ) than the second ( $N=1$ ). One reason for this huge frequency difference can be related to the fact that the first choice is more intelligible for the general public as the main word (الباقي) in the Arabic phrase is a loan word in Persian and can easily be understood by all Iranians, whereas in the second phrase the word (الحي) makes sense only for those who have some knowledge of Arabic. The third sentence is a partial translation into Farsi of yet another Quranic expression (انا لله وانا اليه راجعون) meaning ‘*We are all from Allah and will return to Him*’. A point should be made here: The original sentence in Arabic is a compound sentence [We are all from Allah], [and] [We will return to Him], whereas the translated version concentrates only on the second sentence and the first part is absent. The main reason for this is probably due to a deliberate intention in to direct the attention to the end and not the origin of life in this work.

Occurrence of these forms in the opening space of DANs serves a theological purpose, namely reminding the reader of the inevitability of death as a universal truth, the circular nature of life and death and then life again, and God’s authority as the beginning and end of everything, thus providing relief and peace to believers in facing the inevitable question of death. At the same time, these statements also serve the function of advance signaling the death of somebody.

## **Move 2: Signaling the event**

This move, the shortest in terms of textual realization, serves the function of signaling to the reader which of the four types (*Sham Ghariban*, i.e. the first evening after burial; *Uch*, i.e. the third day after burial; *Girkh*, i.e. the fortieth day after burial; *oril*, i.e. the first anniversary) of mourning ceremonies is being

announced. From sociocultural point of view, these ceremonies do not have equal status and do not call for equal degree of obligation from the public members. For instance, *Sham Ghariban* ceremony, the first mourning ceremony right after the funeral, is of vital importance due to the freshness of incidence and high expectations of the survivors of the deceased from the public to be accompanied and not left alone in their grief. However, due to the very time factor, a huge presence is not usually expected and usually the close relatives and friends who are usually informed of the incident on time get the chance of participating in this ceremony.

This, however, is different in *Tarhim* session, the second public ceremony, which usually takes place on the third day after the funeral and which is publically considered the most formal ceremony of all, whereby due to availability of sufficient time for preparation and time management, public participation is highly expected and usually highly met.

Given this socio-cultural mutual understanding between the family of the deceased and the public, the signaling of the event at this stage of DAN is an effective interactive and informative act from the mourning family side to let the public know which stage of the mourning it is and act accordingly.

### **Move 3: Elegy in verse**

This move was found in 49 out of 50 of the data texts and consisted of short elegies in poetic form either in Azeri Turkish, the ethnic language of Tabriz people, (21 cases), or Farsi, the official language of Iran (29 cases). These lamenting poems serve to express the grief of the survivors of the deceased, and at the same time arouse the sympathy of the public to the bereaved. Three distinctive types can be found among these poems: poems lamenting the loss of the mother, father, or the sibilants of a family in which case may also play the function of encouraging them for participation in the mourning.

### **Move 4: Announcement of a death**

This move was the core schematic element in the corpus as it served the most fundamental purpose of the genre of DAN, i.e. announcing the death of a citizen. This move was realized in a fixed order first by an obligatory sub-move of announcing the name of the deceased, then an optional sub-move of his/her social position (only when the deceased held to socially prominent position), and finally by another obligatory sub-move of listing the names of his/her next of keens. In



giving out the names (of the deceased, survivors, affiliated persons) religious and professional titles were found to be frequently used both in the male and female data groups, as shown in table 2 and explained in the following lines:

<b>Table 2. Information on the titles used for the deceased</b>							
<b>Male Titles</b>				<b>Female Titles</b>			
<b>Titles</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F/C</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Titles</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>F/C</b>	<b>N</b>
Agha(yeh)	Mr.	h/s	5	Khanom/banoo	Mrs.	h/s	9
Haj(i)	p/M	h/r	1	Hajieh	p/M	h/r	17
Aghayeh Haj (i)		h/s+r	15	Banoo Hajieh		h/s+r	9
Karbaleei	p/K	h/r	0	Karbalaeei	p/K	h/r	0
Aghayeh Karbalaeei		h/s+r	1	Banoo Karbalaeei		h/s+r	0
Mashhadi	p/Ma	h/r	0	Mashahdi	p/Ma	h/r	0
Aghayeh Mashhadi		h/s+r	1	Mashahdi Khanom		h/r+s	0
Doktor	Dr.	h/s	0	Doktor	Dr.	h/s	0
Aghayeh Doktor		h/s+s	1	Khanom Doktor		h/s+s	0
Mohandes	Engineer	h/s	0	Mohandes	Engineer	h/s	0
Aghayeh Mohandes		h/s+s	1	Khanom Mohandes		h/s+s	0

**F/C = function/connotation, h = honorific, M= Meaning, N = Number in the data, p/K= pilgrim to Karbala, p/M = pilgrim to Mecca, p/Ma = pilgrim to Mashhad, r = religious, s = secular**

The significance of the appearance of professional and religious titles before the names of the deceased is threefold. First, it can boost the social status of the deceased and their families in the eyes of the public. At the same time and because of the above reason it can serve the additional purpose of attracting more participants in the mourning ceremonies. Finally, in a deeper interpretation it may be indicative of the positive attitude of Iranians in general and people of Tabriz in particular towards two important but somehow competing social institutions of education and faith, one secular and the other religious.

### **Move 5: Public call (1)**

Another obligatory move in the corpus of DANs was a move whereby the general public are invited for participations in the mourning ceremony. The space for this invitation is created right after and as the result of the previous move, i.e. announcement of a death, and contains an expression of invitation plus information

about the venue and time of the ceremony. As for the venue, mourning ceremonies are almost always held in a mosque reserved in advance, so the name of the mosque and its exact address is also provided at this stage.

Regarding the time of the ceremonies, a closer look at the data revealed very interesting social rules. In all the fifty cases (100%) in the corpus the time allocated for the ceremonies was two hours. Forty out of fifty the ceremonies (80%) were held in the afternoon, either in early periods (3-5pm, or 4-6pm) or late periods (5-7pm, or 6-8pm). The ten remaining cases were all held on Friday (a public holiday) mornings (10-12am, or 11am-1pm). This can be explained in light of the fact that people in Iran are at work during the day time six days a week except Fridays. Friday mornings are preferred to Friday afternoons because the latter time is usually expected family gatherings.

### **Move 6: Solidarity in mourning/ boosting the family image**

This move is realized in form of two lists of names, one a short list comprising the full names of the family members (often excluding the female members), and close relatives of the deceased which appear in bigger and bolder fonts right after move 5; and a second list, usually much longer than the first, where only the family names of relatives, friends and acquaintances appear either in order of closeness or intimacy to the family of the deceased or in alphabetical order.

These lists of names serve two overt and covert agendas. On the face of it, the short list may function as a display of solidarity of the families, the relatives and close friends in mourning for the deceased. It also serves the purpose of inviting the public to participate in the mourning which subconsciously may contribute to stronger social coherence. The longer list, too, may help some public members to recognize who the deceased is by recognizing the names of some families on the list, in which case an obligation is created for participation. Both lists, however may also serve covertly the purpose of boosting the deceased and his family's position in the eyes of the public by putting the name of prominent heads of families as signaled by honorifics or academic or professional titles as well as the number of families listed. For instance, the number of families listed in the current corpus varied from minimum 7 to maximum 90 names, signifying the size of the families and consequently their potential social status and power. Interestingly, a gender effect was also noted to be affecting the size of the list of the affiliated families. That is, whereas the means of the number of the affiliated families listed for male group was 36, the figure for the female group was 14, which more than anything can be interpreted in terms of the dominant role of men in the social structure of Tabriz.

### **Move 7: Acknowledging Religious Authority**

More than other social events, affairs related to death have religious connotations. This is universally true. Throughout the world mourning ceremonies for the dead are normally held in churches, temples, synagogues and mosques. These affairs are administered by a board of trustees and one or more clergies participate as the spiritual figures in these events. In some cultures, as is the case in Tabriz, it is part of the mourning tradition for the clergy of the mosque to deliver a speech. This takes exactly thirty minutes towards the end of the two hour ceremony. During this thirty minutes he usually talks about life after death, about moral issues, and the life, deeds and sufferings of Islamic saints. He prays for the peace of the soul of the deceased and thanks the audience on behalf of the family of the deceased for their participation. This necessitates his name to be mentioned in the death announcement notices as a token of respect for the individual clergy and most importantly for the institution of religion. The name, i.e. his religious title, and full name almost always appears in a separate space at the bottom of the DAN in bold large font to make it distinguished from other names.

As for the frequency of occurrence of this move, the analysis of the data showed the move occurred in 88% of the data. To account for 12% absence of the move, the main reason can either be unavailability of the mosque preacher for various unexpected reasons, or in rare circumstances the uncertainty of the mosque authorities in nominating a clergy for the occasion, or mismanagement of the chores of the ceremony by the family of the deceased. In very few exceptional cases, the absence may be due to unwillingness of the family to invite a clergy for the ceremony.

### **Move 8: Public call (2)**

This move was present in %100 cases. The underlying goal of the move is to address female members of the public separately and inform them about the place and time of the mourning ceremony. This may seem a redundant practice due to the presence of move five which has the same function. However, given the fact that the venue and time of the mourning ceremony may be different for women than that of men, its existence is justified. However, more insider contextual explanation can shed more light on the issue here. The majority of six hundred odd mosques in Tabriz are very small in size to accommodate big number of people who typically appear in mourning ceremonies. Some old mosques do not even have separate spaces for women either for praying or public religious ceremonies. A practical solution thought of traditionally has been to confine women's mourning ceremonies to the limits and conveniences of the houses of the bereaved families.

This solution has been working out well for quite a considerable time in the history of the event. However, like many other things, this practice has not been able to persist against recent higher order socio-economic processes. Dramatic population growth together with flux of immigration from villages and town into Tabriz has resulted in drastic rise of land prices in the city with consequential impact on urban planning. Old large houses were demolished and turned into residential complexes depriving citizen of the privacy of traditional houses, with the immediate consequence of holding social gathering such as mournings or weddings almost impossible due to small sizes of the apartments and the interference with the privacy of other residents in the complexes. In parallel development, modern specious mosques have been built with separate halls for women and even some older mosques have been restructured to be more spacious and inclusive. As a result, men and women convene more in mosques for mourning occasions than before. This said, however, DANs still reserve a separate space towards the bottom of the sheets for providing the information on the venue and time of the mourning ceremonies for female members of the public, a feature which may disappear in near future.

## **Conclusion**

The main purpose of this study was to yield a ‘thick description’ account of the Death Announcement Notice (DAN) in terms of its conventional schematic structure. The analysis based on the mainstream concepts and procedures of genre analysis as initiated by the seminal work of John Swales (1990) combined with the researcher’s insider socio-cultural and socio-pragmatic background knowledge on the context of the study, i.e. Tabriz, was able to establish Death Announcement Notice as a social genre with a distinctive eight-move schematic structure by means of which the members of its community (i.e. people of Tabriz) are informed to act expectedly in the event of a citizen’s death; thus showing the powerful role of genres in shaping, directing and regulating the social behaviour of communities. The study discussed the role of higher order socio-economic processes such as immigration, population growth, land price rise, architectural changes, etc. in gradual but constant shaping and reshaping of the genre of DAN, hence underpinning both the dynamicity of genres (i.e. modification potentiality) as well as the reciprocal nature of the interplay between genres and their context of use.

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## Summary

### A ‘Thick Description’ Genre Analysis of Death Announcement Notices

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As a universally recognized social practice, the discourse of the Death Announcement Notice, henceforth DAN, is subject to macro-cultural and micro-contextual influences, and consequently to various procedural strategies that shape its schematic structure. A ‘thick description’, one which combines outsider theoretical models with insider experiential knowledge was adopted for the analysis of a randomly compiled corpus of 50 DAN texts. Based on Swales’ (1990) model of genre, eight schematic moves were discerned. The researcher’s insider knowledge was employed to yield a deeper understanding of this social practice.

**Key words:** Death Announcement Notice, Genre Analysis, Thick Description.